

December 2004

Commentary: Testing, testing ...

The word in Washington, DC, is that the Bush administration soon will release the details of its plan to strengthen high schools by requiring annual testing in grades 9, 10 and 11. At the same time, growing numbers of states are considering changes to existing high school testing programs.

When it comes to high school testing, more of the same will not do. Before federal or state officials rush to add new tests, they should make sure that any testing program supports the high schools' mission of helping every student who enters 9th grade graduate academically prepared for postsecondary education and work, including job training. As we have shown in the American Diploma Project's report [Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts](#), the core knowledge and skills in math and English needed for college-level work are the same ones needed for access to a job that provides a decent income.

This finding has profound implications for the nature of high school assessment systems. To support the high schools' mission, these assessment systems should include three types of measures:

A graduation exam that establishes a floor and triggers help to students.

Students should be required to demonstrate that they meet state standards by passing a graduation exam or series of end-of-course exams. Current exit exams (required in about half the states) are beginning to do this, but Achieve's recent study, [Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams](#), shows these tests primarily measure 8th and 9th grade material — a decent start, but not the rigorous standards students should be meeting to earn a diploma. Over time, the standards should be ratcheted up so that students are required to do at least 10th grade work to pass.

News Clips

Click on the links below to view articles of interest from the past month. Some publications require free registration to read articles.

1. **Beyond paper-and-pencil tests.** In line with a major recommendation of the American Diploma Project, [Rhode Island](#) is requiring students to complete special projects to prove they are proficient in a variety of subjects. Meanwhile, a growing number of teachers and schools are making [research projects](#) a requirement for graduation.
2. **Preparation pays.** The higher education system in [Kentucky](#) is on track to send a clear signal to high school students about what they need to know to be placed in credit-bearing college courses. [Massachusetts](#) is coming at college prep from a different angle, encouraging students to score at the proficient and advanced levels on MCAS with the promise of a college scholarship.
3. **Yes, Virginia, high school does matter.** [Governor Mark Warner](#) is calling for a nationwide focus on high school reform. [Virginia](#) has seen great improvement on the state's end-of-course graduation tests, but the state's colleges and universities don't seem to be paying much attention — they put little emphasis on SOL scores when judging candidates for admissions. Perhaps they should look to Texas where state universities use the high school assessment for these purposes.

More important, exit exams should trigger interventions for students who need them. The purpose of giving these tests is to help students learn, not punish them. Students should have multiple opportunities to take and pass the exams, and they should receive targeted assistance to help address learning gaps.

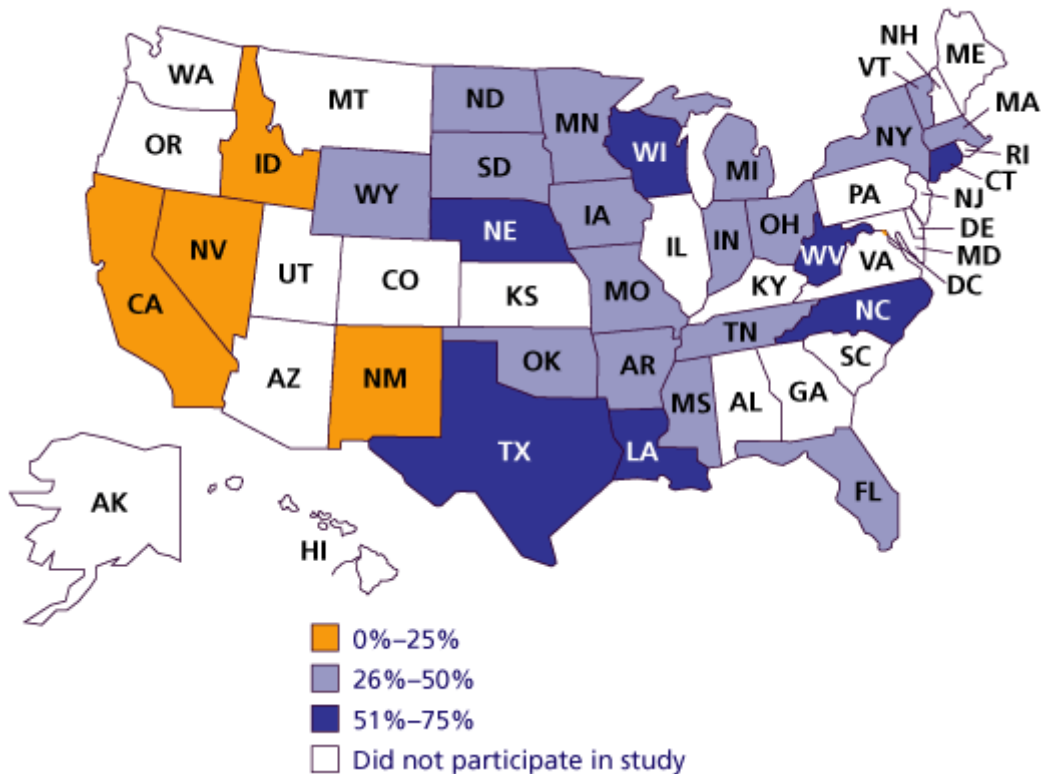


This is the case in Massachusetts and Virginia, two states that have raised the bar and helped all but a few students clear it. Both states invested in tutoring and other academic supports to help students pass the graduation tests, and these investments have paid off. Evoking the image of large numbers of students failing to graduate often is necessary to secure state and local resources for extra help.

Continued, click here to read more.

Did You Know?

Percentage of Students Taking Algebra II and One Higher-Level Math Course, 2002



Source: Council of Chief State School Officers, *State Indicators of Science and Mathematics 2003*, 2003.

Taking a high-level math course beyond Algebra II by graduation is key to being well prepared for college, but only 41 percent of high school graduates in the United States take this course of study. Look for our upcoming report on high school course-taking requirements to find out how many and which states require students to take the courses and content the American Diploma Project recommends.

News from Achieve

- **Course-taking requirements.** Despite the focus placed on graduation exams, course-taking is still the most common criterion for awarding a high school diploma

in the United States. As part of our continuing review of state graduation expectations, Achieve this month will release a new report examining course-taking requirements in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The report also will include recommendations to guide states as they set graduation standards and course expectations.

- **Committed to high standards.** [Washington state](#) recently reaffirmed its commitment to high graduation standards by holding the line and not lowering the passing score for WASL. This decision was based in part on a [recent report](#) from Achieve, which found that the exam is not too difficult to expect students to pass.

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